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THE ARTICULATION OF SOCIAL DECAY: SATIRE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN POETRY

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ABSTRACT Contemporary Nigerian poets have addressed the country's social and political problems using satire to crystallize the malaise affecting their society. Their social critiques rest on their linguistic skill, which renders their work both accessible and popular. The extraordinary lucidity and elegance of these selected poets is demonstrated in the sense of humor reflected in their poems, which endears them to their readers. The poems cited in this paper are characterized by an abundance of anecdotes, humor, suspense, and curiosity. This paper examines the use of satire in the work of contemporary Nigerian poets such as Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Chinweizu, Femi Fatoba, Odia Ofeimun, Ezenwa Ohaeto, Obiora Udechukwu, and Ogaga Ifowodo, emphasizing the role of these poets as synthesizers of, and conduits for, the concerns of the Nigerian society for which they claim to speak. I will attempt to demonstrate how satire is used in contemporary Nigerian poetry to criticize certain aspects of contemporary Nigerian society. Furthermore, the paper focuses on the mediating role of proverbs, aphorisms, and metaphors in the satiric references in selected poems that constitute impassioned critiques of the social and moral problems related to Nigeria's sociopolitical development.

Key Words: Social decay; Contemporary Nigerian poets; Satire; Articulation of social issues; Humor.

INTRODUCTION

Satire, the act of using humor or exaggeration to critique society, has always been a part of literature. Although its use is most apparent in literary works that focus on particular social practices, it is also present in all forms of African literature. G.G Darah noted that, "[T]he satirist is seen as a defender of communal norms and virtues." This image of the satirist has led some students of the genre to discriminate between satire proper, on the one hand, and pseudo-satire or lampoon, on the other. According to this view, a lampoon is a descriptive portrait that relies on invective rather than objective and sophisticated analysis. By contrast, it is argued that satire avoids opprobrious terms and achieves its aim through what the eighteenth century English satirist, John Dryden, called "The fineness of a stroke that separates the head from the body, and leaves it standing in its place" (Darah, 2005: 22–23).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o has also noted that, "Satire takes for its province a whole society, and for its purpose, criticism. The satirist sets himself certain standards and criticizes society when and where it departs from these norms. He invites us to assume his standards and share the moral indignation which moves him to pour derision and ridicule on society's failings. He corrects through painful, sometimes malicious, laughter" (Wa Thiong'o, 1972: 55). Ngugi's definition is echoed by

Tejumola Olaniyan's description of satire as: "The whole society being its constituency, satire focuses its lens on our failings as a community of people, and magnifies one or several of such our sores for critical inspection, using as its surgical tools such sharp weapons as scorn, derision, ridicule, bitter irony and laughter. But the appropriate set of standards-against which our failings can be determined-to form the baseline of satire has often times been the point of departure between satirists and between the satirist and his critic" (Olaniyan, 1988: 48).

According to Kimani Njogu, Northrop Frye viewed satire as "militant irony" that has two fundamental aspects. First, aggression is an indispensable component of satire. Indeed, satire is an attack. Second, Frye viewed irony as satire's weapon of choice (Njogu, 2001: 3). He further emphasized that irony is itself a dialogic relation. By utilizing irony, satirists call on interpreters to refigure the meaning of an utterance in view of its new context. They expect their readers to make the necessary external connections. Satire is dialogic in at least two senses. First, it refers to another text, which is the subject of the critique. Second, it depends on the audience to read it as satire. Consequently, Njogu compared satire and parody, noting that "Satire, like parody, is linked to the carnival sense of the world. In both genres, the world is turned inside out...[B]ecause satire depends principally on the interpreters' ability to recognize that the oblique surreptitious expression is actually an attack with certain goals, it is an ambivalent genre" (Njogu, 2001: 3).

Emerging in the context of European colonialism, satire has always played a significant role in Nigerian literature. Even during the colonial era, leaders of nationalist and independence movements satirized the injustice of foreign domination and exploitation. Thus, individuals such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Dennis Osadebey, and others, used literary expressions couched in satire to advocate essentially political ideas. Their themes often centered on the historical greatness of Nigeria and the debilitating effect of colonial rule. This paper's overarching focus is how satire is used in contemporary Nigerian poetry to draw attention to prevailing social problems such as corruption, the African dependency syndrome, the deception of hapless parishioners by the clergy, and the military incursion into Nigerian politics. The satirical text cited in the paper is drawn from traditional Nigerian culture (oral literature, aphorisms, anecdotes, and proverbs).

THE SELECTED POEMS AND POETS

The analytical focus of the paper centers on eight poems: Chinweizu's *Energy Crisis and Other Poems* (1977), Obiora Udechukwu's *In Omabe* (1978), Odia Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied* (1980), Niyi Osundare's *Village Voices* (1984), Femi Fatoba's *Petals of Thought* (1984) and *They Said I Abused The Government* (2001), Ezenwa Ohaeto's *Songs of a Traveller* (1986), Tanure Ojaide's *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live* (1998), and Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* (2005). The choice of these poems was partially based on the general similarity of their thematic preoccupations and structural concerns. In these poems, the selected poets attempted to establish a nexus between art/tradition and social engagement, to harness African artistic elements, such as proverbs, irony, and orature (which are part

of traditional African cultures), in order to express social criticism/engagement by means of satire.

Niyi Osundare is a prolific poet, dramatist, and literary critic and is the most prominent of the eight selected poets, having published more than 20 books of poetry. His poetry collection, *Village Voices* (1984), was chosen for inclusion in this paper because of its employment of orality in its satirization of social vices.

Tanure Ojaide is a prolific Nigerian poet and novelist who has won national and international awards. He has published more than 15 books of poetry, and his poetry collection *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live* (1998) was chosen for inclusion because of its focus on the inhumane treatment and the trauma of exile experienced by Nigerian poets and other dissenters during General Sanni Abacha's oppressive military regime.

Odia Ofeimun is a distinguished poet whose work concerns contemporary Nigeria's sociopolitical, economic, and cultural issues. At the age of 25, Ofeimun published a controversial collection of poems titled *The Poet Lied* (1980) to challenge the artistic commitment of Nigerian poets during the Nigerian/Biafran war between 1967 and 1970. This collection of poems was chosen for inclusion in the paper because of its depiction of the incompetence of the military in the governance of Nigeria.

Femi Fatoba is a Nigerian poet, short-story writer, and actor. His books of poetry, *Petals of Thought* (1984) and *They Said I Abused the Government* (2001), were chosen for their use of humor as a satiric technique.

Chinweizu is a Nigerian critic, poet, and academic. His politicalization of infidelity in *Faithful Mary Lou* was included in the paper as a satire deploying hunger as catalyst for marital unfaithfulness, given the conditions in contemporary Nigeria.

Obiora Udechukwu is a Nigerian artist, poet and painter who has published several poems in reputable anthologies. His poems in *Omabe* figures prominently in orature and has been chosen as an example of criticism of Nigeria's culture of profligacy.

Ezenwa Ohaeto is a Nigerian poet, short-story writer, biographer, and literary scholar. His *Songs of a Traveller* (1986) was chosen for its use of aphorism as a satiric device.

Ogaga Ifowodo is a member of the younger generation of Nigerian poets, and his collection addresses the subjugation of the Nigerian civilian populace by successive repressive Nigerian military regimes. His *The Oil Lamp* (2005) was chosen to elucidate the psychological trauma that accompanies life in exile.

It is significant to note that General Sanni Abacha's military regime is the primary focus of the poems that explore the interface between political dissent and exile. By focusing on Abacha's military administration this paper raises questions regarding the issue of how military oppression generates socioeconomic and political difficulties, and aims to determine the meanings generated by the literary depiction of torture, incarceration, and killing within the context of the abrogation of fundamental freedoms.

The paper examines how the selected poets attempted to criticize their society, using satire informed by rich African verbal art forms, to create new visions

of life and new poetic idioms. Such borrowing involves the “imaginative use of African traditional symbols, images, proverbs, myths and other traditional stylistic devices” (Bodunde, 1992: 25). The paper will also evaluate both formal and content-related elements of satire, and their significance, in contemporary Nigerian poetry.

SATIRE IN NIGERIAN LITERATURE: A HISTORICAL SURVEY

The ethnic and national groups currently living in Nigeria have rich literary traditions that predate the Arab and European cultural incursions into Nigeria and the West African sub-region in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Such incursions undermined these extant traditions by subordinating indigenous religious ideas and philosophies. G.G Darah cogently described the consequences of these incursions in his paper *Literary Development in Nigeria*:

Today, most of these traditions, like the human communities that created them, have declined. This state of cultural depression is a consequence of the conquest of Nigeria by British colonialism in collaboration with Christian and Islamic religions. The dominant and the most devastating force was, of course, the subordination of Nigeria's economic interests to that of imperial Britain. The consequent devaluation of indigenous cultures and the imposition of colonial ideological hegemony took some time to accomplish. The creation of an educated elite was part of this program of cultural disorientation. This elite is credited with the inauguration of a written tradition of literature which colonialist criticism erroneously takes as the genesis of literature in Nigeria. (Darah, 1988: 1)

Although the earliest forms of literary production among these groups involved orality and orature, contemporary Nigerian literature is in written form. Ernest Emenyonu succinctly articulated the very important role of orature in the formation of Nigerian literature in the *The Rise and Development of Igbo Literature*, in which he argued that the discipline of Nigerian literature has three significant and historically crucial stages: oral literature, literature written in indigenous languages, and literature written in non-Nigerian Languages. Research regarding the development of Nigerian literature must follow that chronological sequence to be meaningful, given that, “[L]iterature as an artistic expression is a cultural activity, oral literature is, therefore, the absolute foundation of Nigerian Literature” (Emenyonu, 1988: 34).

However, Nigerian intellectuals began writing in English in the nineteenth century, and this practice was firmly established in the early twentieth century. It would be impossible not to acknowledge this epoch in written literature, which reached its apogee, as Gareth Griffiths has pointed out, in the African-owned-and-operated newspapers and printing houses that existed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Nigeria. These operations have continued to the present day, “with newspapers still acting as a conduit for

the publication of literature and literary criticism” (Griffiths, 2000: 1). Some of these newspapers, such as *The Anglo-African*, *The Lagos Observer*, *Lagos Standard*, and *Lagos Weekly Record*, had their headquarters in Lagos, Nigeria. Nevertheless, earlier Nigerian writers who wrote in the English language appropriated the colonial language of English, using it for their own ends by manipulating the vocabulary of dissent inherent in this language to produce a satiric condemnation of the exploitation of the agricultural resources of the colonies by the European merchants, and to address the struggle for self-determination and for self-identity. To varying degrees and extents, the earliest forms of satiric writing by Nigerian writers were grounded in the moral overtones and sociopolitical themes of anti-colonial struggles. However, most of these literary works were written in the indigenous Nigerian languages of Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa.

SATIRE IN INDIGENOUS NIGERIAN LANGUAGES

Satire is featured prominently in Yoruba literature, as exemplified by the oeuvre of Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa: *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole* (1939), *Igbo Olodumare* (1949), *Ireke Onibudo* (1949), *Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje* (1954), and *Adiitu Olodumare* (1961). All these works rest on a didactic approach to art. Indeed, Fagunwa satirized greed, gluttony, impatience, anger, and avarice. Moreover, Fagunwa is unusual among Yoruba writers in his complete commitment to the promotion of Yoruba’s linguistic and aesthetic traditions. One Yoruba literary critic, Afolabi Olabimtan, commended this commitment in Daniel Fagunwa, a paper in which he succinctly underscored this aspect of Fagunwa’s work. However, it is as a novelist that Fagunwa stands out among the premier writers of his time. With his use of particularly beautiful expressions and his vivid descriptions of events and places, his ability to blend romance with realism, and his successful use of both traditional materials and borrowed elements, “He towers above all creative writers in Yoruba before him, and wins for himself an eminent position among all Yoruba writers” (Olabimtan, 1988: 14).

Fagunwa used the spirit and the supernatural motifs rooted in Yoruba oral narratives in *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole* (1939), *Ireke Onibudo* (1949), and *Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje* (1954) to criticize social ills in the Yoruba region. The pioneering efforts of Daniel Fagunwa in Yoruba literature have been complemented by the performances of Hubert Ogunde, whose imaginative combinations of the choreographic and musical resources associated with sacred church drama provocatively criticize and repudiate the British colonial authority’s cavalier attitudes toward Nigerian workers. The abuse of power by the British colonial authority is wittily satirized in Ogunde’s scathing dramatic productions: *Strike and Hunger* (1945), *Tiger’s Empire* (1946), *Herbert Macaulay* (1946), *Towards Liberty* (1947), and *Bread and Bullets* (1950), a vitriolic denunciation of the killings of 21 Enugu coal miners by the repressive British police at Iva Valley in November, 1949 (Darah, 1988: 5).

Pita Nwana’s status as a towering father figure in the Igbo literary world was cemented by his novel *Omenuko* (1933), in which he lampooned the antisocial

activities of its eponymous hero, who sold the sons of his relatives and neighbors into slavery and used the proceeds to strengthen his business. In *Pita Nwana*, the renowned Igbo literary critic Ernest Emenyonu commented on Nwana's ability to draw on cultural materials to denounce social vices among Eastern Nigeria's Igbo people. In this paper, he praised Nwana's many talents, including his imaginative use of language, wit, cutting-edge humor, incisive irony, and creation of well-constructed and skilful plots. However, Nwana's distinctiveness as an author is most evident in his unique characterizations. Thus, in *Omenuko*, he concentrates on the development of the hero, "creating thereby one of the most memorable characters a reader can encounter in fiction" (Emenyonu, 1988: 10). In *Omenuko*, Nwana satirized man's obsessive craving for material possessions to the detriment of the well-being of his society.

Satire in the Hausa literary tradition is shaped by the dynamics of cultural practices in Northern Nigeria, especially cultural change that results in significant alterations in fundamental cultural practices relating to marriage, family, the social status of individuals, and the colonial administration and its operations in Northern Nigeria. Prominent among the Hausa writers whose literary works satirize social upheavals in Northern Nigeria are Mu'azu Hadeja, Akolu Aliyu, Sa'adu Zungur, Aliyu Na-Mangi, and Aminu Kano (Yahaya, 1988a: 10–21). Although Aliyu Na-Mangi is a blind poet, his literary prowess is showcased in *Wakar Infi-raji*, a 12-book narrative centered on social and political transitions in Hausa society. However, Sa'ad Zungur may be the most radical of the indigenous Hausa writers, as "in his numerous pamphlets and poems, he advocated the revolutionary defeat of the feudalism and reactionary oligarchy represented by the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC)" (Darah, 1988: 4). Additionally, Aminu Kano's *Wakar Zamani (The Song of Modernity)* (n.d), reflects on emerging social developments and their attendant challenges. This is clearly portrayed in *Wakar Yanci*, a stanza in *Wakar Zamani*, which challenges young men to live up to their society's social demands (Yahaya, 1988b: 89). Satire constitutes a key literary weapon in the works of these writers; it is deployed against the excesses of Northern Nigeria's oligarchy and serves as outright criticism of the oppressive British colonial administration.

SATIRE IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE NIGERIAN LITERATURE WRITTEN IN ENGLISH

During the period from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century, European cultures intervened in the West African sub-region. It was during this period that countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone were established, and the writers and intellectuals produced by these two countries constituted a bastion of intense anti-colonial agitation in the sub-region. This was also a period of prolific literary production in the sub-region from Liberia to Nigeria. Although fictional, J. E. Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911) is undoubtedly autobiographical, criticizing Europe's exploitation of colonial West Africa and stridently advocating for Africans' control of their own affairs.

Rev. Samuel Johnson's *The History of the Yorubas* satirized stereotypical misconceptions of African cultural practices by Europeans. In the view of Gareth Griffiths, Samuel Johnson's intellectual contribution to West African literature is particularly evident in his ability to construct powerful defenses of traditional practices and rebut the garish and derogatory colonial narratives depicting traditional African societies, which emphasized "indiscriminate human sacrifice, mass cannibalism, and other horrors with which the invaders had justified their political and military incursions into the interior of the kingdoms of Ashanti and Benin" (Griffiths, 2000: 29). Kobina Sekyi's *The Blinkards* (1974), produced in 1915 by members of the Cosmopolitan Club in Cape Coast, is a play satirizing the tendency of Gold Coast "intellectuals" to denigrate their own customs and promote European habits to the detriment of African cultural practices. Also in this mold, R. E. Obeng's *Eighteenpence* (1943) satirizes clashes between African and European cultures in a way that is reminiscent of Chinua Achebe's backlash against European cultural hegemony in *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

In Nigeria, literary works written in English before independence in 1960 addressed the corruption of urban life and criticized the colonial authorities and the denigration of the African culture by Europeans. These themes are vividly portrayed in Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City* (1954), which decries the lurid and unstable lifestyles of urban African city dwellers, contrasting such lifestyles with the serenity characteristic of a traditional African sociocultural milieu. T. M. Aluko's *One Man, One Wife* (1969) satirizes the overzealousness and hypocrisy of Christian values in colonial Nigeria, whereas Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) satirizes European intolerance and ignorance of African (cultural) value systems. The thematic preoccupation of *Things Fall Apart* has a striking parallel in James Ene Henshaw's *This is Our Chance* (1945), a play that satirizes the palpable tension between African cultural exegesis and the European cultural world view. The satirical tradition was further embedded in the Nigerian literary landscape by the "Onitsha Market Literature" published between 1947 and 1966. Of the more than 70 authors in this tradition, the most prolific were Orlando Iguh, O. A. Ogali, O. Olisa, and F. N. Stephen. Indeed, with the exceptions of Cyprian Ekwensi, who wrote *When Love Whispers* (1948), *Ikolo the Wrestler and Other Ibo Tales* (1947a), and *The Leopard's Claw* (1947b), no other Nigerian writer of note grew out of this tradition (Darah, 1988: 6). This literary tradition is known for its quaint representation of simplified conflict between African tradition and European culture, its whimsical romantic invocation of rural piety, the simplicity of its language, the brevity of its form, and its low cost.

SATIRE IN POST-INDEPENDENCE NIGERIAN LITERATURE WRITTEN IN ENGLISH

National independence, which was gained in 1960, did not extinguish the satiric tradition in Nigerian literature, which shifted its focus to new targets. One of the most prominent of these targets was the way in which the new indigenous leaders failed to realize the lofty ideals of the independence movement. These issues

were addressed in such novels as T.M. Aluko's *Chief, The Honorable Minister* (This is the original title) (1970), Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965), and Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966) as well as in plays such as Soyinka's *The Jero Plays* (1963a) and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1971). Works in this genre detailed the failures, foibles, and shortcomings of the country's leaders.

However, the satire in most literary works produced during this era was somewhat implicit, as the criticism was usually indirect and not specific. In other words, satire was inherent in the depiction of negative social situations rather than explicitly stated. However, the fact that Nigerian authors were beginning to point out the flaws in their society so early in the life of their nation illustrates the virtually inextricable position of satire in literature in general and in fiction in particular. As the country's social, political, and economic problems became more pronounced, the nature of satire within Nigerian literature became harsher and more explicit, a development that was facilitated by the increasing popularity of Marxist ideology among younger writers, particularly among those who were second and third generation Nigerian writers. Instead of merely portraying inadequacies and shortcomings, many literary artists began to advocate viable alternatives to the situations they depicted in their works.

Thus, writers such as Kole Omotoso, Femi Osofisan, Tunde Fatunde, and Festus Iyayi, among others, began to produce works that satirized social injustice and underscored the need for radical social change. This meant that they not only followed their "non-ideological" predecessors by portraying negative social, political, and economic conditions but they also sought to explicitly show how such negative situations derived from the inherently flawed, unjust, and unsustainable economic system inherent in capitalism. According to them, the only way out of this situation was the destruction of capitalism and its replacement by a socialist-oriented system of governance that would guarantee the fair and equitable distribution of resources and opportunities to every member of society, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, or social status.

The emergence of Marxist and socialist ideologies in Nigerian literature was accompanied by a stronger form of satire in which writers targeted particular aspects of the Nigerian condition. For example, the campaign against gender-based discrimination became more prominent as writers such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Karen King-Aribisala, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Zaynab Alkali, and Ifeoma Okoye produced works of fiction that focused on this issue. Hitherto ignored topics such as environmental degradation also began to receive attention in the works of writers such as Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and Lyndon Barret as well as in those of more-established writers such as Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo, and Ola Rotimi.

Over time, satire has come to be seen as a useful yardstick for measuring the seriousness of the average Nigerian writer and assessing the depth of his/her commitment to progressive social, political, and economic change. Writers who did not espouse radical ideologies were often unfairly dismissed as pro-establishment and against disrupting the status quo. Achebe and Soyinka, in particular, have been viewed in this light by many of their successors, such as Femi Osofisan, Chin-

weizu, Olu Obafemi, and Niyi Osundare (Akingbe, 2011: 247). Some writers have even produced literary works that directly contradict the perceived positions of their predecessors. For example, in *No More the Wasted Breed* (1982), Osofisan caustically responded to Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* (1963b). These developments meant that satire was gradually coming into its own as an important aspect of Nigerian literary works and criticism. It was no longer enough for it to be implicitly encoded in literary works; it was now expected to be overt and explicit. Thus, it was used to evaluate the overall success of the selected poems in this paper.

SATIRE IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN POETRY

In his examination of the rhetoric of philosophy, Jacques Derrida emphasized that the significance of writing corresponds to that of speech. In his deconstructive project, the term "writing" does not simply refer to the graphic notation of language; it also includes the nuances of language that are derived from an intricate historical-intertextual process within which an utterance or a text is situated. Derrida's treatment underscores the prioritization of speech as the bedrock of meaning and argues that, as such, it must convey a comprehensible meaning. The vibrant element in Derrida's postulation about language is his notion of "différance", which is perceived not so much as a word or a concept but as "the strategic note or connection...which indicates the closure of 'presence'" (1973: 131). In other words, différance implies a lack of an immediate and totally accessible meaning due to the fact that language is grounded in a canny and interminable interplay of deferral and difference.

Derrida's deconstructive focus is of considerable importance to an evaluation of satire as the mode of communication in the poetry of Nigerian contemporary poets and will be used in the analysis of the poetry of Femi Fatoba, Odia Ofeimun, Tanure Ojaide, Obiora Udechukwu, Niyi Osundare, Ezenwa Ohaeto, Chinweizu, and Ogaga Ifowodo, whose poems are included in this paper. According to a deconstructionist perspective, meaning emerges from a continuous process of literary engagement. It does not assume that a poem has a "harmonious equilibrium"; rather, it assumes that it involves what Derrida calls a "violent hierarchy" (Derrida, 1972: 146) that imbues a poem with the ability to elicit multiple, conflicting interpretations and meanings, otherwise known as the *aporia*. Consequently, for the deconstructionist, a literary work always involves the interplay of two forces, a situation that led to the notion of a "dangerous supplement" (Derrida, *ibid*), which will always yield instability among the signifiers, thereby upsetting the meaning of even a traditionally tidy and unambiguous reading. This paper will evaluate the selected poems in terms of how "English in the recent Nigerian poetic articulation is stretched in such a way as to approach the linguistic mediation of the poet's mother tongue, which, in turn, shares some affinity with the flavor of other local languages" (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1991: 166). The poems in this paper were selected based on their similarities, in that they all address sociopolitical issues related to Nigeria's nationhood and are marked by the realization that, decades after the nation's independence, social ills such as poverty, corruption,

military rule, connections with extended families, and exploitation of parishioners by the clergy are on the increase.

ORATURE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN POETRY

Given the complexity of life in contemporary Nigeria, satiric treatment of the problems afflicting Nigerian society requires a number of poetic forms, such as proverbs and anecdotes as well as the fusion of literary and oral traditions. This is evident in the poetry of Niyi Osundare, whose work suggests a “contemporary phase of oral traditions existing side by side with the modern written literatures of Africa. They can still be seen and heard everywhere in Africa as vibrant forms of art”... (Bamikunle, 1992: 50). This intersection between orality and modernity is demonstrated in ‘The Prisoner’s Song’, a poem that draws on the Yoruba cultural practice of exchanging verbal insults:

The warder’s wife never bears a proper baby
 The warder’s wife never does
 If she doesn’t give birth to a truncheon
 She delivers a lunatic. (*Village Voices*, p. 24)

The orature in the poem is both lyrical and dramatic, and repetition is used to satirize the image of a prison “warder”. Derrida’s differance theory can be employed to deconstruct the grotesque image of the warder in Yoruba folklore. This image emphasized the viciousness, brutality, and high-handedness that is usually demonstrated in their dealings with prisoners. The pejorative symbolic imagery of the warder is grounded in words such as the “warder’s wife”, “truncheon”, and “lunatic”, which eloquently reflect the negative imagery of the warder in Yoruba folklore. Ostensibly, orature is the traditional medium of Osundare, who often identifies with the misery and poverty of the masses in his poetry. In *Village Voices*, he deploys orature to rail against the injustice and social inequity in Nigeria’s political milieu:

My words will climb the tree of wisdom
 Feed multitude with fruits of thought
 and plant the earth with potent seeds (*Village Voices*, p. 1)

As an overarching motif in the poem, orature is intricately, elaboratively, and allusively deployed as a symbol of the liberation of the masses. This demonstration of artistic commitment on the part of Niyi Osundare underlies H. H. Okam’s suggestion (1991) that there are clearly discernible links between literature, history, and the social environment of the society from which literature emerges:

Literature is at one and the same time History’s major bequest to mankind and the principal corrective of history.... Because literature begins as an experience and ends as an imitation, fiction that is, it has an edge over his-

tory. By the simplest of definitions, history is events and records of the past. As events history moves in a straight line, and even those who by their actions are said to have changed the course of history only change the direction of the line; Literature, on the other hand, gaining illumination from hindsight presents not only an imaginative reconstruct of reality but also overtly or covertly offers correctives to history by suggesting what should have been... (p. 54)

The relationship between text and society is further elaborated by Sanya Osha, who posited that textual studies should not be limited to aesthetic qualities alone. Instead, considerable attention should also be given to the texts' sociological background to achieve a holistic appreciation of its meaning:

Now we may pose the question: why is it necessary for the writer to vacate the merely aesthetic space for the political sphere?...The stranglehold that African political structures have over African lives is much too tenacious to allow for any kind of political complacency on the part of the writer... (p. 176)

Orature resonates as satire in Tanure Ojaide's *Message of Lust*, in which the poet employs the conditional to underscore the 'antithetical juxtaposition of state-ments' in his criticism of the nonchalant attitude of politicians to the management of the economic resources of the country:

The fowl is guzzling corn
It knows not how much it's bought;
The woman is frying eggs
She doesn't feel the labor of the hen's anus (*Children of Iroko*, p. 3)

The rhythm of the poem is sustained by the use of rhetorical proof to delineate the symbolic images of profligacy and insensitivity on the part of Nigerian politicians who mismanage Nigerian economic resources. Proverbs are also used rhetorically by both Ezenwa Ohaeto and Obiora Udechukwu to challenge negative social attitudes: "If rain wipes away footprints/Does it wipe away words?" "If a shrew smells when it is alive/What horrible odor will exude at its death?" "How many baskets of water can mold a block?" "How many he-goats can guard a yam barn?" In the context of this trend in the language of contemporary Nigerian poetry, Nwachukwu-Agbada noted that, "The proverbial form is popular among the post-war poets.... Being an essential accoutrement of the oral medium, the post-war poet in his love for accessibility may have found it very expedient to employ. In addition, the proverb, being a rhetorical genre, may have interested the recent Nigerian poets because of the capacity of this form to drive home populist expressions known to be the common forte of the younger poets" (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1991: 168–169).

Ezenwa Ohaeto's *Songs of a Traveller* also demonstrates the effective use of

aphorisms to comment on the attitudes and behavioral patterns of contemporary Nigerians:

If rain wipes away footprints
Does it wipe away words?
Rather than drown in a stream
Let the water sweep away my cloth...
The Man outwitted by a snail
Should not be offered meat
If you like funeral rams
Why recover from sickness?
If a shrew smells when it is alive
What horrible odor will exude at its death? (*Song of a Madman*, p. 16)

The heavy reliance on aphorisms in this poem affords the poet the opportunity to question several natural activities that defy traditional and cultural explanations in a typical African setting. Readers familiar with the use of aphorism in the works of Osundare, Ojaide, and Ezenwa Ohaeto will also find a clear parallel in the utilization of this poetic device for satiric purposes in Obiora Udechukwu's *Omabe*:

How many baskets of water can mold a block?
How many he-goats can guard a yam barn?
And we talk of yam-masters
But their sons eat alibo
Fish that lives in the ocean
That same fish washes with spittle.
And you talk of hell
Does it need death to survive?
The question looms in the evening cloud
It hangs so it's now part of the sky
The question that questions their stools (p. 6)

In this poem, Udechukwu manipulated a proverbial model to satirize Nigeria's wanton profligacy during its oil boom. During this era, Nigeria was able to amass enormous wealth from its crude oil proceeds and did not engage in "saving for rainy days". The proverbial model in the poem laments the effects of such wasteful spending, typified in contemporary Nigeria's poor healthcare facilities, educational problems, and debilitating unemployment statistics, which conspire to devalue Nigeria's image in the community of nations. The trio of Osundare, Ohaeto, and Udechukwu effusively make use of the "metaphors of Nigeria" to satirize a series of misplaced priorities, missed opportunities, and broken promises: the failure of the political class to provide effective governance for the nation, a deep-seated tradition of corruption among members of the ruling class, and the decay in the social infrastructure. These works develop metaphors for Nigeria; that is, they employ a description (an anecdote, a vignette, an urban myth, a tale, a modern

folktale) that encapsulates the essence of the Nigerian situation, especially the contradictions and paradoxes that shape it and that, to a large extent, constitute its tragedy. Such metaphors are often parable-like in content and structure, their simplicity standing in stark contrast to the complexities and absurdities they represent.

REPUDIATION OF THE DEPENDENCY SYNDROME IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

Femi Fatoba's, *Christmas Message to My Relations* provides a humorous social commentary on widespread grinding poverty and the urgent need to overcome it to maintain equilibrium in the daily struggle to earn a living:

Am gone searching for an occasional job
Because in January the renewal is due
On the insurance policy
And the vehicle license
Of that car you all love
To ride in. (*Petals of Thought*, p. 55)

The poem satirizes the dependency syndrome in the traditional African milieu and its inherently problematic nature in urban locations such as Lagos, Ibadan, Accra, Nairobi, and Johannesburg, where virtually every aspect of living has been overtly commodified. A close reading of the poem reveals the economic difficulties experienced by the archetypal individual: "...in January the renewal is due/on the insurance policy/And the vehicle license." The poem's lamentation of insolvency broadens and deepens our understanding of the complexity of economic hardship in post-independence Nigeria, especially the extreme difficulty of coping with economic stress and the demands of dependents. The poem obliquely satirizes the African tradition that dictates that an individual who has reached some level of education and has started working is expected to use his status as a middle-level worker to shoulder financial responsibility for his younger siblings and other members of his extended family. However, the protagonist of the poem is obviously overburdened and decides to walk away from his apartment. He leaves a "note" behind to explain his motive for abandoning his apartment:

Am gone searching for an occasional job...

The poem uses the personal pronoun "I"/"I am" to refer to an action executed by the individual, and it is the reader's role to recognize what is taking place at the moment, which de-emphasizes any direct action a reader would have expected of the protagonist. The protagonist's action is now integrated into a declarative statement, "Am gone searching for an occasional job." It is interesting to note that this action is eloquently rendered through a dialogue rather than a monologue. It is an action that at least implies a voice: the enunciation of an intention to walk away from his economically demanding kin.

DENUNCIATION OF THE MILITARY IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN POETRY

The recurrent incursions by the Nigerian military into Nigerian politics and their attendant destructiveness are evident in the monumental decay of the infrastructure, economy, and social norms of the country. This has inspired a considerable number of poetry collections, written primarily by contemporary Nigerian poets. These poets have personally experienced these events over an extended period of time. Oyeniyi Okunoye noted the following:

Proof that Nigerian poetry has been very dynamic is that it has drawn on a variety of experiences. But of the three major events that have significantly impacted on it —the Nigerian crisis of the 1960s, the Nigerian civil war (1967–1970), and military rule (1966–1979 and 1983–1999)— the impact of the military dictatorship has been far more pervasive and enduring. It gave a unique identity to Nigerian poetry by assigning it a new role and redefined the social standing of the poet: it emboldened the poet, inspired a variety of poetic idioms and modified the taste of the audience. (Okunoye, 2011: 65)

The goal of contemporary Nigerian poets in portraying the military has much in common with that of the radical historian: to expose the military as an aberration in the governance of post-colonial Nigeria and to reveal the brutality and dehumanization of Nigerians during military rule (Okunoye, 2011: 76). As exemplified in Odia Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied*, satire is explicitly used in these poems to criticize the military administration's ineptitude at managing waste disposal and creating a clean environment:

And if you want to know why
The streets grunt now
Under rank garbage
Under the weight of decay, of nightsoil
More than ever before
They will point triumphantly, very triumphantly
At their well-made timetable:
“We shall get there soonest:
Nightsoil clearance is next on the list.” (p. 5)

One decisive point made by this poem involves the chicanery and penchant for subterfuge on the part of Nigeria's military authority: “They will point triumphantly, very triumphantly/At their well-made timetable.” The general ineptitude of the military administration and its shoddy political performance is also referenced by the following lines: “The streets grunt now/Under rank garbage/Under the weight of decay, of nightsoil.” The image of the military portrayed in the poem involves characteristics of deception and unreliability. Femi Fatoba's *They Said I Abused the Government* represents another example of the backlash against

the military. The poem deploys invective and vitriolic exuberance that transcends Fatoba's artistic restraint; he uses a satiric voice to decry the government's insensitivity and its corresponding devaluation of its citizens. The iconography of the destruction perpetrated by the military authority is evident in craters on roads, dilapidated schools, and decrepit hospitals, which are vividly mocked by Fatoba:

I asked the human tongs of Gestapo
 How I did abuse the government.
 Did I say the government is deaf
 And does not hear the cries of her people!
 Did I say the government is lame
 And never lifts an arm in the service of her people!
 Did I say the government is blind
 And does not see where she is going!
 Did I say the government is a cannibal
 Killing and eating her own children!
 Did I ever say anything
 Bigger than the small mouth
 With which I ask simple questions?
 Anyway, who am I to abuse the government! (Fatoba, 2001: 8)

The courage with which Fatoba calmly catalogues the governmental tragedies associated with the military should be explicitly acknowledged as it may be obscured by its appearance in the seemingly innocuous rhetorical guise of humor, which is used to obliquely deride the military's failure to govern responsibly: "Did I say the government is lame/And never lifts an arm in the service of her people!" "Did I say the government is blind/And does not see where she is going!" Fatoba's satirical deftness, rooted in Yoruba witticism, illustrates Richard Hoggart's argument regarding writers' deployment of the "gift of gab". He argues that writers appeal to the collective imagination of their readers "...not the attitude toward language of the creative writer, trying to mold words into a shape which will bear the peculiar quality of his experience; but a fluency, a 'gift of the gab' and facility with thousands of stock phrases which will set the figures moving on the highly conventionalized stage of their readers' imaginations. They put into words and intensify the daydreams of their readers" (Hoggart, 1957: 209). This distinct form of poetic artistry underscores the position of contemporary Nigerian poets, who are in search of a form of expression that will enable them to escape the strictures imposed on free expression by repressive governments.

CONDEMNATION OF THE EXPLOITATION OF INNOCENT PARISHIONERS BY THE CLERGY

Consistent with his perceived artistic obligation to cleanse Nigeria of social malaise, Fatoba did not spare the church, which he viewed as a citadel of mon-

umental corruption. Rather than ministering to the souls of the congregation, pastors are surreptitiously preoccupied with how much they can gratuitously steal from the “offering plates”. Oyeniyi Okunoye’s *Writing Resistance: Dissidence and Visions of Healing in Nigerian Poetry of the Military Era* (2010) draws attention to Fatoba’s sustained effort to utilize humor and satire in *Petals of Thought* (1984). To this end, Fatoba “...has consolidated his position as a skilful poet in the satirical convention....*Petals of Thought* (1984) had previously established his capacity for satire, revealing his skill at deploying humor and irony for satirical purposes” (Okunoye, 2011: 72). In ‘Jesus Saves’, Fatoba presented a gory and disturbing account of the everyday harassment and pauperization of hapless Nigerians who are trapped in the exploitative web of numerous churches that have embarrassingly mushroomed in the nooks and crannies of Nigeria’s landscape. Fatoba addressed three major points that demand urgent consideration from the perspective of the failure of the church in contemporary Nigeria. First, he expressed concern that the pastors have abandoned their primary duty of preaching salvation to their congregations and that they, instead, amass wealth, thereby repudiating the popular Christian saying that, “This world is not our home.” Second, when the pastors abdicate their primary duties, the morals of everyone in the society will be compromised. Third, Fatoba believed that such willful dereliction of duty by pastors exacerbated the moral crisis in the country:

From the saint and the sinner
 From the robber and the robbed
 From the pauper and the rich
 From the fanatic and the atheist
 Jesus saves at Barclays Bank (p. 21)

The church’s exploitation of its congregation and the criticism thereof is important in the context of the artistic attention devoted to this issue by Fatoba in this poem; such attention acknowledges his indebtedness to society, which requires that writers serve as social barometers of wrongdoing in their society. Consistent with Derrida’s notion of *différance*, language is symbolically employed in the poem to examine the “Salvation” motif of Christianity. “Salvation” is ironically manipulated by the poet to delineate the desperation of the clergymen, who recruit everyone to their church. The expressions “From the robber and the robbed”, “From the fanatic and the atheist”, and “Jesus saves at Barclays Bank” vividly signify the hypocrisy of “salvation” reflected in the “spiritual masturbation” associated with the Pentecostal church’s extremist credo in contemporary Nigeria. The poem’s description of the church’s indiscriminant proselytization has the visual quality of a movie. The poem further sarcastically denounces the misplaced skill with which pastors and clergymen fleece their hapless victims. The denunciation is eloquently extemporized in the following stanza:

From funeral mass and wedding banns
 In slums and well-planned states
 From hymns and sermons

In the very lean month of lent
 Jesus saves... (p. 21)

CRITICISM OF MORAL VICES IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN POETRY

Contemporary Nigerian poetry poignantly focuses on the issue of moral corruption. The insatiable desire for money and material well-being has been vividly satirized in some of these poems. These poems treat urban life as symptomatic of the erosion of moral values and underscore the gulf between the rich and the poor. Whereas the rich have enormous wealth with which they purchase comfort and luxury for themselves, the poor continuously struggle as they search for scarce jobs. Indeed, the poor are trapped in the throes of poverty, prostitution, and alcoholism. This scenario is vividly captured in Chinweizu's *Faithful Mary Lou* which presents a farcical treatment of a woman's unfaithfulness to her spouse. The poet satirizes hunger as a motivating factor to comment on the plight of a woman who is caught having sexual intercourse with another man. The woman trivializes adultery, when she tells her husband:

Ah only slept with his name;
 Ah only slept with his color;
 Ah only slept with his money not with him.
 Ah ain't been unfaithful to you, can't you see? (*Energy Crisis*, p. 26)

The poem satirizes hunger as a scourge of human existence and a source of depravity among the downtrodden. An individual's inability to meet this fundamental need can lead to the kind of moral trade-off exemplified by the actions of the woman in the poem. The irony and humor in the poem underscore the seriousness of hunger as a social issue as they draw attention to the intensity of this existential issue. Derrida's demystificatory exegesis, which relocates meaning from immanent and immutable sources, is evident in the tenor of the poem as it explores the pain and inconvenience associated with the "hunger" of the protagonist, which led her to sleep with other man's "name", "color", and "money" but not with his personality. This dislocation of the meaning of adultery reinforces the need to reappraise the modernist subversion of Nigeria's social and cultural ethos by the influence of Western civilization.

EXILE AS A SCOURGE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN POETRY

To appreciate the treatment of exile by contemporary Nigerian poets, one must first understand alienation, which is beautifully dramatized by Lenrie Peters in *He Walks Alone*. This work presents a fragmented chapter in the life of an African student whose first experience of exile juxtaposes the concrete and evocative world of Bathurst with the cold, hostile environment of England. The protagonist desperately desires comfort and warmth, which are denied to him in his exile. The

experience of exile and forced emigration underpins the satire in the poetics of Tanure Ojaide's *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live*. The satiric nexus of anguish and nostalgia articulates the pain and alienation of being forced to run away from one's own country, an experience shared by Ojaide and other poets during the military regime of General Sanni Abacha (1994–1999). During this period, many politicians and civilians were detained, and the poem laments the danger of returning to Nigeria while Abacha's reign of terror persisted:

There's no one so hurt at home
Who forgets the pain outside-
That's the persistent ache one carries
until home is safe to return to
when it no longer matters
where you choose to live! (p. 77)

Due to the social and political changes in Nigeria, the emphasis has increasingly shifted from satirizing unemployment, bribery, and corruption toward addressing a transcendental sense of homelessness: "There's no one so hurt at home/who forgets the pain outside." Exile, the theme of this poem, is viewed in terms of the individual's struggle for physical and spiritual survival under an intensely oppressive military regime. Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* shares the same thematic preoccupation with alienation. However, Ifowodo's poetry contains bitterness and angry outbursts that detail the horrors, dangers, and misery of living in Nigeria during General Sanni Abacha's regime. The poem explains Ifowodo's exile as a necessity:

What are the things that grow here?
Those that grow from stone, lacking
Life and root flesh and water
Things cut as caps
For the baldness of stone...
And how do children grow here?
Out of wombs whipped with want
And desire, they burst forth, to be
Tough like street leather, sweet and hardy
Like sugarcane, to learn love in safe time.

Here, we will walk the street
where laughter is hidden in deep places
and stores cannot shut their doors
choked with hearts that bleed from gathered wounds
and you will see nothing can grow here, but agony. (Ifowodo, *The Oil Lamp*, 2005: 45)

The poem does not flinch in its portrayal of the anomie that is grounded in the nightmare of Nigeria's political landscape, which forces the poet to leave Nigeria.

The enormity of this pervasive anomie is reiterated in the declamatory tone of the poem, which evokes a transcendental hopelessness: “choked with hearts that bleed from gathered wounds/and you will see nothing can grow here, but agony.” The use of satire not only provokes anguished questions about the Nigerian government’s ability to guarantee the safety and well-being of its citizens but also draws attention to the country’s decline into the status of a pariah characterized by incongruities, atrocities, and human degradation.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined without been exhaustive, the use of language to articulate, the social, cultural, and political concerns of contemporary Nigeria by analyzing how selected poets have used satire to criticize certain aspects of contemporary Nigerian society. Satire is evident in the selected poems’ use of proverbs and irony, artistic elements that are grounded in African tradition and culture, to express social criticism and social engagement. The poetics of the pieces cited in this paper were influenced by the oral tradition, “which often adapts the story line of myths and traditional dramatic idioms to interpret contemporary life” (Bamikunle, 1992: 50). This appropriation of the African tradition/culture is borne of the selected poets’ “recognition of the functions which verbal art forms perform in the society” (Bodunde, 1992: 25). Indeed, their pervasive use of irony, witticisms, and proverbs is rooted in African orature, and the Nigerian social landscape serves as the space that formed the literal and metaphoric focus and foundation of the selected poems.

As George Test has noted, by its very nature, satire tasks the audience to connect the work and the context in which it finds expression (Test, 1991: 32). Additionally, the poems cited in this paper constitute denunciations of the military, criticisms of moral vices, and repudiations of the dependency syndrome and other problems in the Nigerian social milieu. This paper has demonstrated how selected Nigerian contemporary poets have harnessed the elements of tradition/culture and social commitment in their use of satire to criticize Nigeria’s social problems.

The poets whose poems have been discussed in this essay have relied on Derrida’s *différance* to provide convincing “metaphors of Nigeria” in their descriptions of the tragedy of missed opportunities and broken promises. A variety of poetic devices, such as irony, sarcasm, proverbs, humor, and metaphor, were employed by the poets to engage the reader as a collaborator. The selected poets have used their poetics to create awareness about the impact of the corruption, mismanagement, and profligacy of successive Nigerian governments, to describe the grinding poverty and unemployment in contemporary Nigeria, to present an impassioned explication of the predatory attitudes of the clergy in Nigeria, and to repudiate the moral vices prevalent in contemporary Nigeria. In summary, in confronting the inevitable choice between the often opposing demands of art and commitment, these contemporary Nigerian poets have chosen to address the country’s social, cultural, and political circumstances, synthesizing aesthetic considerations and social relevance to draw critical attention to the social ills inimical to

the growth of the country.

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